HOW TO PREVENT NEW COLD WAR IN AFRICA

By Paul Ejime

Ambassador Abdel-Fatau Musah, ECOWAS Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security has advocated urgent measures to "reconcile tensions between democracy, governance and development," and "a new compact with external partners to prevent a new Cold War in Africa."

"The recent retreat from liberal democracy and growing instability in the West Africa sub-region and the wider Continent is taking place within a complex and dynamic global landscape characterized by an unprecedented convergence of multiple threat and opportunistic vectors, namely geopolitical and geostrategic shifts, economic downturn, currency fluctuations, digital. advancements, climate, and environmental concerns, and socio-cultural dynamics," Dr Musah, a former Director, West African Division, United Nations, affirmed.

Addressing the International Relations Society of UK's Oxford University at its Corpus Christi College, on 19th January, under the theme "Regionalism in West Africa and Causes and Course of Recent Instability," the ECOWAS senior official said, that while there might be no "single-factor explanation for the growing political and security malaise …the fledgling and stumbling liberal democracy in Africa requires urgent resuscitation through the infusion of local culture, traditions, and realities."

He posits that "Strengthening electoral democracy by promoting good governance and development requires the collective efforts of all - governments, the citizenry, their organizations, and partners."

Dr Musah listed major threats facing Africa and by extension, West Africa, as follows:

- The cumulative impacts of pandemics, poor leadership, and macroeconomic mismanagement amidst a global financial, economic, and social downturn.
- Governance and development deficits (State capture, economic mismanagement, currency instability, retreat from the periphery, marginalization, and selective provision of basic services; identity politics, youth crisis, and corruption.
- Manipulation of constitutional and electoral norms and the weaponization of the judiciary to enable unconstitutional maintenance of power.
- Asymmetric security crisis (terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism, led principally by Al Qaida and Islamic State affiliates; identity-based violence (farmer-herder dynamics, inter-communal violence)
- Climate change as a threat multiplier (dynamics in Central Sahel and worsening cyclical floods and drought).
- Geostrategic interests and geopolitical shifts, tensions between growing interdependence amid the collapse of multilateralism and deepening multipolarity: Dynamics between the NATO Powers (Collective West); China, Russia, India (BRICS); Medium Powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar) threatening a return to proxy wars.

- Emerging strategic choices by leaders of the region towards traditional and emerging powers without a clear exit strategy from the dependency syndrome.
- Genuine changing sentiments from below towards traditional powers, the re-birth of nationalism, and the instrumentalization of insecurity and public moods by sections of the military and their associates, and
- Explosion of new technologies the pervasive influence of social media and the manipulation of opinion through misinformation and disinformation.

The Commissioner's prescriptions to prevent Africa from becoming the theatre of a new Cold War, include the "need to reconcile the tensions between democracy, governance, and development through measures to enhance the production of democratic dividends."

Other measures include the "Restoration of constitutional order in countries in transition (Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger) through dialogue and pressure, combating unconstitutional changes of government and manipulation of constitutional and electoral laws through a review of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, as well as social and peer pressure on errant leaders."

Civil society and private sector agencies should also be empowered in favour of democratic consolidation and inclusive economic development, the Commissioner said, while also advocating: "The enhanced operationalization of the ECPF (ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework) and the establishment of ECOWAS ECOSOCC (ECOWAS Economic, Social & Cultural Council) to be expedited."

Ambassador Musah further called for the "Strengthening of counter-terrorism efforts - the activation of the ECOWAS Standby Force in its kinetic mode and the coordination of disparate counter-terrorism efforts: In this regard, the timeliness of the recent UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of assessed contribution to sustainably fund African-led peace support operations cannot be overemphasized."

Tracing the evolution of ECOWAS Post-Cold War trends, he said there was a "temporary shift towards a unipolar world under Pax-Americana amidst hopes for greater multilateralism (which) coincided with the virtual collapse of weak States and rebirth of liberal democracy in Africa due principally to pressures from below against autocratic, dictatorial, and military rule, amidst the weakening of external protection for such regimes. "

He also cited the "civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire (1989-2003); and the National Conferences (which) gave birth to liberal and illiberal democracies via multi-party elections."

There was "ECOWAS' pivot towards security engagements, bringing into sharp relief the obvious nexus between security and development," Commissioner Musah said, adding that this was followed by the adoption of regional Protocols to reflect the changing dynamics.

These include the ECOWAS leaders "Declaration of Political Principles (1991); Revised ECOWAS Treaty (1993); Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999);

Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which prescribes zero-tolerance for unconstitutional change of government), and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008)."

Dr Musah noted that until 2021, all 15 ECOWAS Member States were governed by leaders chosen through multiparty elections, and "for the first time West Africa, and Africa as a whole, witnessed the defeat of incumbents at the ballot box. To compare: Only one recorded peaceful alternation of power until 1991. Since then, there have been 31 across the continent."

He said, "The façade of democracy was unfortunately also underpinned by serious governance and development deficits: marginalization, youth unemployment, and ethnic and religious tensions," adding: "The end of the first Decade and the beginning of the second of the 21st Century witnessed accelerated instability characterized by the impacts of the Ebola and COVID pandemics, financial, food, and social crises, governance deficits and intensification of terrorism and violent extremism, and the re-entry of the military into politics."

There have been at least nine reported successful or failed military incursions into politics in West Africa since 2020, with four countries currently under military rule (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger).

The Commissioner's presentation was made against the background of worsening insecurity and disputed electoral processes in the region (Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia), with only Liberia producing a transfer of power from a ruling party to the opposition, as ECOWAS struggles to douse simmering political tensions in Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal.

The regional organization has successfully negotiated political exile in Nigeria for Sierra Leone's former President Ernest Bai Koroma, who was slammed with treason charges by the government of his country over an alleged coup attempt last November 26th following disaffection from the June 24th presidential election.

ECOWAS is also currently seized with developments in Guinea Bissau where President Umaro Embalo, in a recent controversial decision dissolved the opposition-controlled National parliament causing political disaffection in a country that operates a semi-presidential system that allows the party that controls the legislature to name the Prime Minister in addition to the control of the National Guards, while the President has authority over other national armed services.

In Senegal, which has crucial elections on February 25th, 2024, the Constitutional Court on Saturday disqualified two major opposition presidential candidates following the government's recent decision to sack members of the national electoral commission after it included the name of a controversial opposition leader on the electoral list.

The Gambia is another ECOWAS member State under close watch amid opposition allegations that President Adama Barrow could be gunning for a controversial third-term mandate.

Describing “citizen apathy” as “the accelerator of bad governance…,” Dr Musah acknowledged that “the political, economic, and social conditions in the region are dire but not irreversible.”

“Restoring confidence in governance in the region requires a compelling strategic approach, as well as a multidimensional, multi-actor, and multiagency effort by all critical local, national, and regional actors in a strategic partnership with the African Union and the United Nations,” he affirmed.

But more than ever before, elections have become triggers and drivers of divisive and deep-rooted political crises in Africa, exacerbated by the undemocratic influence of money and overbearing interference of the judiciary.

Consequently, analysts have warned against the dangerous trend of major election outcomes being decided by the courts instead of through the ballot box, with wealthy politicians encouraged by their brazen assurance to buy court judgments after rigging elections and blatantly taunting their opponents “to go to court.”

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